

The National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee: Working for Change in Higher Education

Introduction

In Ireland in 2023, disabled postgraduates, despite having seen a year-on-year increase since 2018, represent 3% of the total postgraduate population and are under-represented across higher education (HE) (figure based on AHEAD, 2023). This compares to 8.1% representation at undergraduate level (AHEAD, 2023). Policies have primarily focused on pathways and funding to disabled-undergraduate education; there has been less research and practice focusing on the postgraduate experience (Grant-Smith et al., 2020, Guigui et al., 2023).

A postgraduate qualification is a key indicator of a higher standard of living and a better quality of life, with disabled postgraduates earning more than those with an undergraduate qualification (HEA, 2023). Ireland's strategic direction has focused on expanding its research capability by developing its research talent pool through postgraduate research, but we may be losing out on talented disabled researchers due to this under-representation (HEA & NDPAC, forthcoming).

Engaging in postgraduate study and research can be both an extremely rewarding and a lonely experience for many (Algeo, 2021). Disabled postgraduates, while they face many similar barriers to undergraduates, also face a range of unique barriers. Awareness of the impact of these barriers on the participation of disabled postgraduates is scant.

This lack of understanding has been linked to a failure to include disabled postgraduates in decision-making processes that profoundly affect their lives (Rath & McCarthy, 2021). Barriers for disabled postgraduate students can occur at all points of the typical

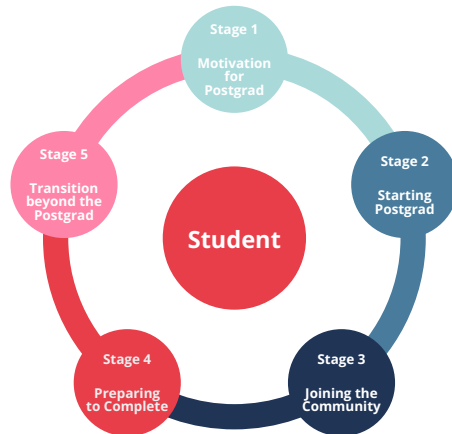


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Postgraduate research can be both rewarding and lonely, and disabled postgraduates – who are under-represented in higher education – face unique barriers. Awareness of the impact of these barriers on disabled postgraduates' participation is scant. This article details how a committed group have come together to increase the representation of disabled people at postgraduate level. It presents the elements that are needed to amplify the collective marginalised voice to enable change.

postgraduate life cycle (see figure) (Rath et al., 2021). Although some supports do exist, these are often fragmented and fail to address key issues facing disabled postgraduate students.



Postgraduate life cycle as identified by the Trinity College Dublin Forum for Disabled Staff and Postgraduates

This experience can be made lonelier when you feel like you don't belong, your voice is not being heard, or you are not receiving the right supports. To date, hearing the lived experience of disabled postgraduate students has not figured prominently in decision-making, though there are encouraging signs of change through the recent engagement of the National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee (NDPAC) with government agencies. Some of the main barriers include:

Pathways: Although there are pathways to HE at undergraduate level, like the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE), there aren't similarly transparent and defined pathways and support mechanisms at postgraduate level (Rath et al., 2023).

Funding: Many funding schemes are not disability-aware and do not build in the extra cost of disability support, requirements for extra time, and extra costs for attending academic and professional development opportunities such as conferences or seminars (ibid.).

Isolation: Disabled postgraduate students often experience disconnection from the rest of the postgraduate community, as their needs are not being recognised and met, which limits their capacity to engage with opportunities in the postgraduate environment (ibid.).

Lack of awareness: There is a lack of awareness that postgraduates may require different types of supports, and college administrators and supervisors may not be aware of how to effectively support disabled researchers (ibid.).

A catalyst for constructive action

A committed group of disabled postgraduate leaders established the National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee (NDPAC) in 2020. They were

determined that the voice of disabled postgraduates and early career researchers would be heard at the national HE decision-making table. NDPAC is established as a Disabled Person's Organisation (DPO), which means it is led by disabled people and is rooted in the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

With the support of the Higher Education Authority, AHEAD, and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, NDPAC has begun to bring about change through amplifying and channelling the collective lived experience of disabled postgraduates, to inform and shape decision-making in higher education. NDPAC has:

- » postgraduate representation across disciplines from each of the universities, and plans to expand to include the technological universities
- » a three-year plan to work in partnership with AHEAD to create a national disabled postgraduate community.

Hearing and acting on the lived experience of disabled students is essential to developing a more inclusive environment for all (NDA, 2022).

Central to creating a sense of belonging and connection is developing an identity and a voice as a postgraduate and early career researcher. Connection is 'the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued' (Brown, 2021). Engagement in peer groups is associated with a range of benefits, including social development, physical health, and psychological well-being.

NDPAC offers disabled people a safe space to share experiences of barriers such as institutional ableism and discrimination and to develop strategies for overcoming these. It offers a place to work as a collective to bring about meaningful change in the disabled postgraduate environment. Belonging is inseparably linked to inclusion, equity, and diversity, and all four in tandem act to improve student success. NDPAC creates spaces to foster social connections and communication that in turn nurture creativity, innovation, and success (West, 2022). Of course, not all disabled people may wish to participate in a group, but just knowing it exists builds confidence (Rath, 2020).

Elements for success

NDPAC has shown that the key elements essential for success include the following:

Fostering the emergence of leaders from non-traditional backgrounds is essential, and these leaders may face many extra challenges associated with their lack of

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social capital. Higher education institutions must recognise and nurture these leaders.

Senior leaders in higher education can play a significant role in ensuring that their institutions are proactive in creating accessible environments that welcome and value disabled postgraduates and early career researchers.

Respecting the community: There must be a positive campus climate, which appreciates the value of hearing the lived experience of disabled postgraduates and acts to address their concerns.

Accessing support: Disabled postgraduates will probably require access to reasonable tailored accommodations in the postgraduate environment to enable full participation.

Building capacity: It can often be difficult to understand how things get done, especially if you are from a group that is outside the ruling class. Capacity-building on how to prepare proposals or presentations and arrange meetings is important.

Creating collegial relationships is central to making change happen. These relationships should be built on respect and trust, so take the time to build them. For our group, being able to bring solution-focused proposals forward acted to build respect.

Locating knowledgeable mentors who guide as opposed to direct the group is essential to ensuring that the change process is owned and shaped by the disabled postgraduates.

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Conclusion

The National Access Plan 2022–2028 established key performance indicators for postgraduate study for selected priority groups, including disabled students. The UNCRPD requires state parties to work with DPOs, including disabled people in all decisions that concern them. We as educators have a responsibility to ensure that all students have the opportunity to engage in postgraduate study – but inclusion alone is not enough. We must cultivate an environment in which students can create meaningful connection, feel like they belong, have the tools to succeed, and have their voice heard.

What steps are you taking to increase representation of disabled postgraduates and early career researchers in your decision-making structures, and to creating a culture where all disabled students feel like they belong?

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